ABOUT BRADY
Founded in 1974, Brady works across Congress, courts, and communities, uniting gun owners and non-gun owners alike to take action, not sides, and end America’s gun violence epidemic. Our organization today carries the name of Jim Brady, who was shot and severely injured in the assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan. Jim and his wife, Sarah, led the fight to pass federal legislation requiring background checks for gun sales. Brady continues to uphold Jim and Sarah’s legacy by uniting Americans from coast to coast, red and blue, young and old, liberal and conservative, to combat the epidemic of gun violence.

ABOUT MARCH FOR OUR LIVES
March For Our Lives is a national student-led movement to end gun violence in America. Its mission is to harness the power of young people across the country to fight for sensible gun violence prevention policies that save lives. Since the historic march in the nation’s capital and 800+ sibling marches in 2018, MFOL registered thousands of new voters, helped to pass more than 50 gun safety laws around the country, held the 2020 Presidential Gun Safety Forum, and released the bold gun safety plan Peace Plan For A Safer America. Concurrently March For Our Lives has established nearly 300 youth-led chapters across the country, continuously growing this chapter network to give young people a local forum to exercise their activism. For more information visit www.marchforourlives.com.

ABOUT TEAM ENOUGH
Team ENOUGH is a youth-led organization whose mission is to educate young voices about gun violence and mobilize them to take meaningful action against it. Supported by Brady, Team ENOUGH strives to harness the expertise and experience of today’s youth to advance an intersectional approach to gun violence prevention with a focus not only on regulating access to firearms, but also on addressing the ways systemic racism and environmental factors cause gun violence to disproportionately impact communities of color.
INTRODUCTION

Our country is currently in a moment of societal, political, and cultural upheaval. The institutions we have been taught to trust are faltering; the racist foundation these systems have been built upon has been laid bare for all to see. From how the coronavirus has disproportionately affected communities of color to law enforcement’s unequal targeting of the Black community, the illusion of fairness in America continues to fade for many. The same root causes that have led to the unjust and inequitable lived experiences for communities of color have long perpetuated a cycle of violence that disproportionately leaves these communities vulnerable to the scourge of gun violence.

Often the response to that perpetuated violence are solutions that, intentionally or not, increase both police actions against, and the subsequent incarceration rates of, under-resourced communities. The communities that shoulder the burden of our nation’s flaws have also been historically marginalized and cut out of the democratic process. These communities have been deprived of the avenues of direct democracy most necessary for citizens to have agency in their own future - their right to vote.

There is a groundswell of leaders, organizations, and individuals raising their voices to propose ways we can turn this collective rage and momentum into lasting change. While there is no one right way to do so, we must start by recognizing the white supremacist ideology inherent in both U.S. law enforcement and the country’s political processes — inherent because white supremacy is the foundation of all U.S. political systems. Our criminal justice system selectively disenfranchises many previously incarcerated citizens, even once they have served their time. Communities of color and those living with disabilities have been historically excluded from the electoral process; it is critically important to the future of our democracy that we recognize this reality and dismantle the barriers that have marginalized these communities.

Through moving polling places to inaccessible locations, instituting onerous requirements for receiving and sending absentee ballots, passing strict identification and signature matching laws, creating barriers to voter registration, disenfranchising previously incarcerated individuals, shortening early voting opportunities in high-density neighborhoods, refusing to address polling location issues such as long lines, and failing to conduct comprehensive public outreach and education campaigns, those in charge have perpetrated a democratic system that is not equally within reach to all citizens. This highlights why a policy like universal Brady background checks — a policy supported by more than 90% of Americans across the political spectrum — has failed to secure a favorable vote in the U.S. Senate, and is only the law of the land in approximately half of the states which that body represents.

We aren't advocating for these policies "in addition to" our shared fight for gun violence prevention — our organizations have come together because we recognize that creating an equitable and safe democracy is inextricably tied to our fight for gun violence prevention.
While we cannot address all of these issues in this toolkit,¹ we hope to protect voting — the cornerstone of our democracy — by providing activists and advocates with a comprehensive look at substantial and effective reforms achievable between now and November 2020. We aren’t advocating for these policies “in addition to” our shared fight for gun violence prevention — our organizations have come together because we recognize that creating an equitable and safe democracy is inextricably tied to our fight for gun violence prevention. This toolkit will discuss a variety of possible policy changes — large and small, brief and lasting — belonging to four broad categories:

1. **Vote by mail & absentee voting**;
2. **Voter registration**;
3. **Early voting**;
4. **Restoration of voting rights**.

The key to this toolkit is that the solutions it suggests are ones we can plan for and implement immediately. While many of these changes can be enacted by election officials in your state, some may need to be mandated by your governor, mayor, attorney general, secretary of state, local or state court, local or state legislature, or some combination of the above. Regardless of the “who,” we have attempted to provide a guide to understanding the “how.”

With that, we recognize that many of the policy changes or implementation modifications that we advocate for throughout this toolkit and the accompanying state toolkits will require varying degrees of additional funding at state and local levels. While barriers to funding are persistent — especially given the coronavirus pandemic, which has required dramatic budget reallocation and difficult financial decisions for many states and municipalities — grant programs do exist, and elected officials must prioritize voting rights as an absolutely fundamental pillar in our democracy. We must also demand that Congress provide states with the $4 billion in funding that is necessary to ensure the 2020 elections are safe, equitable, and accessible to all.² Both Brady and March For Our Lives have echoed this important funding request on the federal stage as a part of the Congressional coronavirus relief efforts. This toolkit includes maps that will assist you in identifying your state’s current laws. This will enable you to advocate for more robust voter choices and protections and to help educate your elected officials on proper implementation of both current and new laws.

We offer our sincerest thanks to the many organizations and individuals whose advice and insight on this complex issue were invaluable to the toolkit’s construction, particularly the Center for American Progress, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, Guns Down America, and the Hub Project. The resources of these groups, along with the Brennan Center, the ACLU, the NAACP, and many more, helped to inform and shape the materials you will read below. We are grateful for and indebted to these organizations and the dedicated individuals who work every day to protect the voting rights of all Americans.

This toolkit offers tangible ways for you to speak up about necessary voting reforms in your community. It is only by raising the collective power of our voices that we can ensure all Americans have equitable access to free, fair, and safe elections.
Our organizations are proud to unite in an intergenerational vision that identifies this critical work as a key element of our platform to end gun violence. For decades, gun violence prevention advocates and activists have waged hard-fought battles against legislators bought and paid for by the corporate gun lobby — even as lives are one by one snuffed out by suicide, homicide, domestic violence, police violence, and unintentional shootings. Victims’ families and survivors have been forced to watch as legislation supported by the vast majority of the American public across the political spectrum has been shut down by a system inaccessible to so many due to the inherent inequalities in our electoral process. The communities that face the highest risk of gun violence in this country are also - not coincidentally - those who are pushed to the periphery of our democratic system. These inequities are intentionally perpetrated to prevent those who are most impacted by issues like gun violence from being able to take part. By being excluded — in whole or in part — from the process of voting, these constituents lose the opportunity to hold their elected officials accountable for their actions.

Of course, our organizations are no strangers to the importance of elections. 20 years ago at the Million Mom March, Sarah Brady famously cried out a call to action when she stated that “we must either change the minds of lawmakers on these issues or, for God’s sake, this November let’s change the lawmakers!” Eighteen years later, when March For Our Lives defined the gun violence prevention movement for a new generation, one call that prominently echoed from crowds in cities and states across the country was as simple as it was familiar: “Vote Them Out.” We proudly join the chorus of civil rights advocates who have long demanded our country live its spoken values of granting every citizen the right to participate in the democratic process. Toward that end, we ask you to join us in seizing the moment and combating the insidiousness of voter suppression — and the distrust it breeds in marginalized communities across the country.

**HOW ARE GUN VIOLENCE & DEMOCRACY CONNECTED?**

Statistics show that the majority of people across the United States support efforts to prevent gun violence. For example, nearly every poll since 2013 has shown more than 90% of Americans support universal background checks for every gun sale.¹ That said, actions in support of common-sense gun policies are most likely to occur only when elected officials represent the values of the populace — and when all voters are equally represented at the local, state, and federal level. These representatives must stand for the unique interests of gun violence victims and survivors in order to ensure future generations are spared the pain and trauma felt by too many in the U.S. today. Put simply, representation matters.
As the movement becomes increasingly cognizant of how gun violence disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx communities, it has become more critical than ever for gun violence prevention activists to support civil rights advocates in dismantling systemic and systematic barriers to voting. This ensures that communities most impacted by gun violence are able to vote for elected officials willing to take concrete steps to prevent and protect all communities from the scourge of gun violence.

There is a general understanding that Black and Latinx communities experience gun violence at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts. However, we urge activists to not simply note this disparity, but build it into the narrative describing why gun violence is one of the most urgent issues in this moment. The experiences of under-resourced communities should be as commonly heard and prioritized as the experiences activists share about mass shootings and unintentional shootings in the home. Similarly, the issue of police violence is no longer the sole responsibility of civil rights advocates or racial justice organizations; a mother grieving the death of her child does not experience more or less pain based on the origin of the bullet, which is why we stand firm in the assertion that police violence is gun violence. Election years are one of the most worthy and appropriate times to highlight the need for leadership invested in change.

- The Framers tell us that the fabric and power of our government “flow” from the “legitimate authority” of the people. Our government was explicitly founded on this principle: consent of the governed. We know that this bedrock principle has never been applied equally since the founding of our nation; from the beginning, many voices have been silenced by systemic inequality and outright suppression. Yet, this is a principle and vision that we continue to aspire to.

- Nowhere is this clearer than in our nation’s ongoing gun violence epidemic, where we see overwhelming bipartisan support for common-sense policies — over 90% for universal background checks — that cannot receive a vote in Congress.

- We see that the communities most affected by gun violence, namely Black and Latinx communities, face the greatest barriers to making their voices heard.

- It is not enough to name these barriers and the inequalities they preserve. If we are to prevent gun violence, such obstructions must be actively dismantled. We cannot fully and properly address gun violence without improving access to our electoral system for Black, Latinx, Asian, Native American, and other historically marginalized communities and voters, such as those living with disabilities.

- To bring about policy change, we must have representatives that are elected by and responsive to the American people — all of them. Without this kind of direct and faithful representation, the issues most important to all Americans, such as gun violence, will never progress toward their solutions.
If you are Black in America, you are 10 times more likely to be the victim of a gun homicide than a white person. Black Americans make up a higher percentage of gun violence victims in this country, and 1 out of every 13 Black Americans cannot vote due to a past conviction. That is four times the rate of other Americans. 

In many communities across the country, the shootings of Latinx and Black individuals go unsolved at a dramatically higher rate than those of their white counterparts. These communities also suffer the most from stringent voter ID laws and other barriers to voting, like removing or rolling back early voting centers. In Chicago, a city that has long struggled to solve homicides, the rate of unsolved murders is not equal amongst the population of the city. When the murder victim is white, 47% of cases are solved, compared to just 33% for Hispanic victims and less than 22% for African Americans. 

Polling place lines are a consistent problem across the United States, but research shows that lengthy wait times are most likely to happen in communities with minority populations. For example, consider Arizona’s 2016 primary election, during which closures of polling places disproportionately impacted the city’s Latinx population. Data showed long lines across all Maricopa County — which includes Phoenix, the state’s largest metropolitan area — but in census tracts with a large Latinx population, the average wait time at the closest voting centers was more than four hours. Average wait times across the county, comparably, were about half of that.

Latinx communities also face an outsized risk of dying from a firearms homicide compared to their white counterparts. Nationwide CDC data shows a Hispanic individual is about twice as likely to be the victim of a gun homicide than a white person. This data is borne out even further in states like California, where over a span of 17 years more than 16,600 Latinx individuals were killed due to gun violence. 45% of those victims were between the ages of 10 to 24. This fear is particularly acute in the aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Florida, where a majority of the victims were of Puerto Rican descent.
In the 2016 election, about 24% of the American voting population did not physically visit a voting booth to cast a ballot, instead relying on absentee and mail-in voting to participate in the democratic system from home. While historically under-utilized across many states, many citizens use the vote-by-mail system to alleviate the barriers associated with illness, disability, occupation, childcare obligations, transportation challenges, or travel; others cast their votes remotely simply because doing so is convenient. No matter the reason, voting by mail has proven to be just as secure as in-person voting, increases voter turnout, and has the added benefit of easing wait times at polling locations. Perhaps most importantly, though, this voting method is an essential tool for those with an illness or disability that prevents them from accessing in-person polling places.

Voting by mail or by absentee ballot will be more important than ever in 2020. Our knowledge about how the coronavirus spreads across communities obligates us to ensure that every American feels safe to cast a ballot in order to protect our democracy. That decision will look different for every individual, but offering a comprehensive program by which individuals can easily request, complete, and return a mail-in ballot is critical for expanding voter turnout in November. These reforms will require cooperation between governors, mayors, attorneys general, secretaries of state, city and county councils, and state and local courts to make the necessary changes ensuring that vote-by-mail and absentee ballot programs can be accessed by the broadest possible swath of the population. Some states, aware that the November election is rapidly getting closer, are already making these vital preparations; the New Hampshire Secretary of State and Attorney General recently co-authored a memo clarifying that the coronavirus may be used as a valid excuse to obtain an absentee ballot in this year’s primary and general election. In their memo, they made a simple, powerful statement: “Voters should not have to choose between their health and exercising their constitutional right to vote.” We agree.

On May 5, a coalition of concerned organizations, academics, medical professionals, and private individuals echoed this sentiment in a letter to Congress, emphasizing that voting is not just a constitutional right, but a “hallowed obligation[] and privilege[]” that citizens should not be forced to give up over health concerns. In Wisconsin, the in-person primary resulted in at least 40 potential coronavirus cases in Milwaukee County alone. We know that this is just the tip of the iceberg should there be no changes before November to allow for a more expansive use of vote-by-mail. The Brennan Center estimates that a comprehensive vote-by-mail program will cost between $982 million and $1.4 billion nationwide, making funding a top priority in the coming weeks and months.

**WHAT TO CONSIDER**

Vote-by-mail is not, and should not, be regarded as a simple panacea. Certainly, mail-in voting can provide a critical access point for those who don’t feel safe
voting at an in-person location, or due to physical, mental, or occupational limitations. However, not everyone can readily access — or prefers to use — vote by mail. For instance, vote by mail is not a convenient option for certain communities, such as Native Americans, and individuals with certain disabilities who rely on in-person voting locations the most. Many accommodations for individuals with physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities can only be found at in-person polling places, and requiring these individuals to vote at home is likely to result in their disenfranchisement.

We must recognize that current circumstances make expanding vote by mail policies absolutely critical, especially for individuals who cannot wait in long lines or risk exposure to the coronavirus. Protecting alternatives to in-person voting is important to a variety of diverse populations; voters must be provided with a plethora of options for safely and securely casting their ballots.
1. **Advocate for a temporary or permanent change to state law permitting absentee voting without requiring an excuse.** In states where laws mandate that voters provide an excuse to receive an absentee ballot, ask officials to add the coronavirus to the list of criteria to fulfill this requirement. Research your state to find the individual who has the authority to clarify that fear of the coronavirus constitutes an acceptable excuse, and ask them to act now.

2. **Ask election officials to temporarily or permanently remove burdensome requirements—like requiring the signature of a witness, notary or otherwise—that must be met for an absentee or mail-in ballot to be valid.**

3. **Implore election officials to expand options for requesting and returning mail-in or absentee ballots that are accessible to a variety of individuals.** Ensure voters can request absentee ballots online, in-person, or via phone, email, or postal service. Ask officials to provide voters with postage-paid envelopes, to prevent socio-economic barriers to exercising this right, and to place plentiful and secure drop boxes in close vicinity of public transportation, especially in communities that have been historically marginalized or which lack access to ample in-person polling places.

4. **Urge officials to develop a strategy to accommodate the expected increase of mail-in or absentee ballots.** This strategy should include a plan for ensuring that everyone who requests an absentee ballot receives one early enough to ensure that filling out and returning the form before Election Day will not be a problem. This must also include arrangements for processing, sorting, and counting the absentee or mail-in ballots received without delay.

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### RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO INFRASTRUCTURE

- Obtain pre-paid return envelopes for mail-in ballots.
- Devise a plan to obtain and distribute secure ballot drop boxes with accompanying security, such as guards or cameras.
- Develop a system by which voters can track their ballots and obtain e-reminders for key deadlines through text or email.
- Invest in sorting equipment, high speed ballot counters, and commercial space for processing.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO STATE OFFICIALS FOR SUPPORTING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION:

- Immediately clarify changes to state law and implement a comprehensive voter education and awareness campaign to ensure all eligible voters know their options for voting and can make an educated choice on how they will cast their ballot.
- Ensure that ballot sorters and counters are given a pay increase for serving during the pandemic.
Vote-by-Mail and Marginalized Communities

Expanding vote-by-mail will help thousands, potentially millions, of eligible voters to exercise their right to vote safely, but it is not a simple solution for a problem as complex as the one that we face in 2020. A potent combination of decades of voter disenfranchisement paired with a global pandemic challenges us to do more with the resources that we have. We would be remiss, however, if we did not recognize that vote-by-mail and absentee voting carries with it major disadvantages for historically marginalized communities.

Black Americans, for example, traditionally rely on voting at in-person polling places. In the 2018 midterm elections, only an approximate 11% of Black voters cast ballots by mail, and this is not because the majority of Black Americans are unaware that this option exists. Instead, sporadic use of vote-by-mail by Black voters stems from historic mistrust of systems that have barred them from the political process for decades. A recent poll found that more than 40% of Black voters reported that they were worried their vote wouldn’t be counted if they vote by mail. Additionally, for a population that has faced consistent hurdles to their ability to vote, the appeal of showing up on Election Day comes from the heart: “There’s a very deep emotional connection to casting a ballot in person, to really be able to see and hold that receipt that your ballot was cast,” emphasizes Sabrina Stevens, Campaign Director for Color of Change PAC. For some Black Americans, voting by mail may prove to be unattainable because of the high rates of those experiencing homelessness or unstable housing.

For those living with various disabilities, in-person voting may be a critical lifeline to protecting not just their ability to vote, but the secrecy and integrity of their ballot. Nearly 30% of the total electorate — over 62 million individuals — either has a disability or lives with someone who does. Voters living with disabilities span the spectrum of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and region, but the unique services they may require to vote are vitally important to protect. While 29% of voters living with disabilities used a mail-in ballot to vote in 2016 compared to just 20% of those without, recent polling still shows that a majority — 58% — would still prefer to vote in-person. Voters across all identities hold a unique fondness for the act of casting a ballot in person, but for others it is an absolute necessity. Voting centers are home to resources for those who need assistance to cast a ballot, particularly the vision-impaired or those with physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities who require accommodations by a trained poll worker. Eliminating access to these resources would have the unintended consequence of disenfranchising individuals who rely on these systems to be able to privately cast a confidential ballot each election.
EARLY VOTING

As previously alluded to, the upcoming election will be uniquely dangerous to participate in, not to mention challenging to execute, due to the coronavirus pandemic, and it is therefore imperative that additional safeguards be put in place to protect the health of voters and election workers. Early in-person voting, which allows voters to cast their ballots in the weeks leading up to Election Day, is one way to ensure that each American voter can safely participate in the democratic process.

The positive impact of alternative forms of voting extends to Americans across race, ability, and socioeconomic status. Early voting allows for voters with full-time jobs, childcare needs, and disabilities to participate at times not limited to election day — a fact widely recognized by voting rights advocates.\(^{28}\) The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) notes that long election day lines can dissuade voters with disabilities or time restrictions, especially if the choice is between their job and exercising their right to vote.\(^{29}\)

Early voting increases participation in the democratic process by simply increasing the amount of time — and, accordingly, opportunity — for that participation to occur, which helps alleviate issues such as long lines and restrictive voter work schedules.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

Early in-person voting remains a necessary resource, even as absentee voting becomes increasingly available. Research shows that early voting is one way to address the systemic barriers racial minorities often experience as voters.\(^{30}\) History and data have shown that southern, Black Americans have primarily relied on early in-person voting more than absentee and election day voting.\(^{31}\) Early voting provides voters flexibility in choosing when they will vote and helps ensure that people with scheduling conflicts on Election Day can access the ballot box. Weekend early voting, especially on Sundays, helps ensure that Americans who work can still participate and empowers churches within Black communities to lead Sunday “souls to the polls” voting drives.\(^{32}\)

EARLY VOTING BY STATE

![Map showing early voting by state](map_url)

*Data: early in-person voting.*

**Note:**
- Delaware passed early in-person voting, but it will not be in effect until 2024.
- New Mexico allows for 25 days of early voting in the County Clerk’s office, but only 14 days of early voting for all other locations.
1. Advocate for a statewide policy providing for comprehensive early voting, if such policies do not currently exist.

2. Encourage the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as masks, gloves, and sanitized writing instruments to poll workers and in-person voters during Election Day and the early voting period.

3. Lobby elected officials to increase the number of polling locations available for early voting and Election Day voting. This would decrease wait times, which have deterred voter participation in the past, and help ensure that everyone present practices effective social distancing.

4. Remain vigilant and monitor legislative initiatives that seek to reverse policies intended to increase early in-person voting and vote-by-mail. In states with early in-person voting, advocate for expanding the number of early voting days.

RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO INFRASTRUCTURE:

- Purchase personal protective equipment based on the needs of each polling location, such as the number of poll workers deemed necessary and the volume of voters expected.
- Devise a plan which analyzes population densities to identify the locations most appropriate for hosting newly-designated early voting locations.
- Provide a transparent process allowing residents to learn more about a change to early voting policy and solicit public opinions about proposed changes.
- Advocate for policy change such that early voting is available for no fewer than 20 days.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STATE OFFICIALS FOR SUPPORTING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION:

- Identify the number of polling places designated for early and in-person voting. This should inform the amount of PPE required based on expected voter numbers and population. Funding should be earmarked for purchasing this equipment.
- Develop a plan that identifies which communities are most in need of increased access to early voting and provide an adequate number of polling locations to meet those needs. Identify also the number of additional poll workers required to support new polling locations and earmark funds to compensate them.
While systemic structural barriers still exist to voting in the United States, the presence of firearms can pose another unique obstacle for citizens attempting to vote at in-person polling locations. The presence of firearms during the exercise of another Constitutional right can serve as a means of intimidation, whether intended or not, particularly in a nation where 58% of American adults report that they or someone they care for has been impacted by gun violence. In 2016, then-candidate Donald Trump encouraged crowds of mostly-white supporters to “watch other communities” on Election Day. This thinly-veiled commandment for white citizens to patrol and monitor the democratic actions of fellow Americans came on the heels of decades of voter intimidation, harassment, threats, and disenfranchisement known all too well by people of color in this country.

There is currently no federal law prohibiting the presence of firearms at polling sites. Instead, regulation is left to the states, a large majority of which allow guns to be carried in and around a polling place. Data from a 2016 campaign from Guns Down showed that in less than 12 hours, voters in 28 states had reported sightings of firearms at polling locations. For many gun violence survivors, the potential of coming into contact with a firearm poses a substantial threat to their emotional and physical well-being during voting. One Virginia voter expressed that she “felt intimidated” by an armed man outside her polling station in 2016; “I had to explain to my nine-year-old son why a man with a .357 Magnum is standing outside the polling station,” she said.

Gun violence has shaped the voting process in uniquely terrifying and tangible ways. In 2016, multiple polling places in the Los Angeles area were put on lockdown and closed after a shooting with an assault weapon killed one person and injured three others outside. Firearms have increasingly been brandished at protests to intimidate and silence their opposition, and the mere presence of firearms at polling places will continue to be a threat as we move into 2020 and beyond.

Unfortunately, the threat of violence is not restricted to the armed layperson. In recent months, the tension between law enforcement and marginalized communities, often impacted by voter suppression tactics, has increased. There is a history of over-policing in communities of color, and the presence of law enforcement at polling locations could act as a deterrent, especially in our current climate. For example, local law enforcement watched Georgia voters in a predominantly Black neighborhood for over five hours after the polls had closed. Activists have an opportunity to advocate for polling locations to feel safe for all members of their community. This includes reassessing polling locations within or adjacent to police stations, which may discourage Black and Latinx voters concerned with being stopped and accosted by law enforcement on Election Day. Now more than ever, elected officials need to evaluate the usefulness of deploying armed law enforcement at polling locations.
VOTER REGISTRATION

In order to vote — to access one of the most fundamental rights of U.S. citizens — almost every state requires individuals to take an affirmative step: registration. The United States stands alone as the only major global democracy that "requires individual citizens to shoulder the onus of registering to vote (and re-registering when they move)."\(^\text{40}\) This system, by its very nature, prevents tens of millions of eligible voters from being able to exercise their right to vote. Some states have taken steps to dramatically ease this individual burden by modernizing their voter registration systems and harnessing available technology to reach marginalized communities, thereby bringing underrepresented populations into the democratic process. This undertaking can happen in a multitude of ways, but this toolkit focuses specifically on how to make voter registration more accessible through technology and same-day registration mechanisms, as well as what particular considerations must take place given the current pandemic.

The questions of how, where, and when eligible voters are able to register has come into stronger focus this year, when it will undoubtedly be more difficult to access systems that have been relied on for decades not only to register voters, but also to bolster voter turnout, particularly among underrepresented demographics like communities of color and youth. Voter registration typically takes place at government agencies, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV); at targeted voter registration events; through “Get Out the Vote” efforts in neighborhoods; or via door-knocking. Most, if not all, of these services are being curtailed or completely eliminated in the run-up to the November election due to the risks of transmitting the coronavirus through human contact.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

It is vitally important to ensure that there are thoughtful alternatives to in-person voter registration methods, particularly when social distancing measures are recommended to prevent the unintended spread of the coronavirus. Online voter registration is an effective option for ensuring Americans can register safely and efficiently during a public health crisis. In 2016, online registration accounted for 17% of all voter registrations,\(^\text{41}\) proving not only that citizens will use the process when available, but also that it can be implemented in a secure way that protects sensitive information. In 12 states, however, individuals still cannot register to vote online.\(^\text{42}\) In a nation where upwards of a million people are prevented from engaging in their civic responsibility because of outdated and archaic voter registration systems,\(^\text{43}\) we must ensure that the process of registering is clear, easy to follow, and accessible for all. By updating these systems to include a more online-focused registration process, states have the simultaneous opportunity to ensure that more voters are included in the democratic process while also substantially decreasing the costs of labor, printing, processing of forms, and postage.\(^\text{44}\)

Sometimes, even when a citizen has registered, their registration can be invalidated,\(^\text{45}\) or even purged.\(^\text{46}\) “Purging” occurs when a state “cleans up” its list of registered voters to ensure that individuals who have died or are no longer eligible cease to be listed on the
voter rolls, a process which has not only been misused, but frequently results in eligible voters — especially those from communities of color — becoming wrongfully disenfranchised. A change of residence may also hamper the ability to process a registration before the deadline for an upcoming election. In these cases, some form of same-day registration is absolutely essential to ensure that every American who wishes to cast a ballot on Election Day can do so.

Same-day registration is a simple policy with myriad benefits beyond assisting those who have been targeted by voter purges. For young voters, newly-minted citizens, those who have recently changed addresses, or simply those with busy lives, same-day registration offers a critical backstop that enables any eligible voter to cast a ballot on Election Day. In some states, deadlines for voter registration can be as far as 30 days from Election Day itself, meaning that many citizens who intended to register in a new state or at a new address simply miss the deadline through no fault of their own. Notably, same-day registration does not unfairly favor voters on one side of the political aisle over the other; it is a non-partisan attempt to ensure that all enthusiastic voters are able to cast a ballot when they arrive at their polling place, whether they forgot the deadline, moved to town three days ago, or were unfairly targeted by a voter purge. Research suggests that same-day voter registration can boost turnout by an average of approximately five percent — something that Americans of all political parties should support.

The strength of our democracy relies on voter turnout, voter engagement, and participation in political systems from the local through federal level. By ensuring that voter registration moves fully into the 21st century and that voters have the opportunity to register at new polling locations up until — and on — Election Day, we take a step toward protecting democracy for all.
Call on your elected leaders to adopt same-day voter registration during early voting and on Election Day, and establish procedures for processing same-day voter registration. Advocate for election officials to — at a minimum — extend voter registration deadlines to account for potential difficulties that may arise due to the coronavirus crisis overloading the system.

Urge your state election officials to develop, fund, and launch a system for voters to complete their voter registration application online.

**RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO INFRASTRUCTURE**

- Ensure that websites and any corresponding applications involved in online voter registration are properly secure and free from vulnerabilities that could result in the theft of sensitive user data.

**RECOMMENDATIONS TO STATE OFFICIALS FOR SUPPORTING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION:**

- Support and launch voter education and information campaigns that publicly announce important deadlines for voter registration and the ways in which voters can register or check their registration in a safe and accessible manner.
RESTORATION OF VOTING RIGHTS

The right to vote is occasionally framed as a privilege, but voting is the cornerstone of our democracy. For individuals with a felony record, there are many barriers standing in the way of the restoration of their voting rights. For instance, it is estimated that 4.5 million citizens are denied the right to vote because of a past criminal record. Based on recent data, voter disenfranchisement based on a previous criminal record includes one in thirteen, or roughly 2.2 million, Black Americans.

Mass incarceration and the disenfranchisement that follows is hard to disentangle from the efforts to solidify civil rights for Black Americans. This is particularly important because of the disproportionate incarceration of Black citizens. According to the Pew Research Center, Black people accounted for only 12% of the adult population, but 33% of those incarcerated in 2017. Data from the Brennan Center indicates that approximately one in 13 Black Americans were ineligible to vote, which is a rate four times higher than non-Black Americans.

The data highlights an issue Black communities, voting rights advocates, and racial justice activists have known for quite some time: the communities most in need of social policy reform are those that experience the highest rates of disenfranchisement due to strict state laws preventing those with certain criminal records from voting. This is purposeful. Per the American Civil Liberties Union,

"Silencing the voices of people with convictions weakens the democratic system of government. ... When formerly incarcerated people can’t vote, all of us miss out on the perspectives and experiences they can offer our country’s political conversation."

WHAT TO CONSIDER

Because Black communities are disproportionately impacted by the carceral state, policies created to disenfranchise the formerly incarcerated often disenfranchise Black citizens. These missing voices are particularly important within the gun violence prevention movement. According to the Pew Research Center, 57% of Black respondents know someone who has been shot — in comparison to 43% of white respondents — and members of their community are often unrepresented by those in office.

As activists advocating for the restoration of voting rights to individuals previously stripped of this right, it is imperative to separate out the right to vote from that of owning a firearm. In 2016, Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe unintentionally removed barriers previously prohibiting individuals with felony records from being able to legally purchase a firearm. Activists should ensure their elected officials are aware of how the restoration of voting rights and restoration of gun rights overlap to avoid unintended consequences that could further endanger communities.

Despite past missteps, it is imperative that we as gun violence prevention advocates support and protect the
voting restoration process. The inclusion of previously incarcerated individuals who are often from the communities most impacted by gun violence allows for a broader coalition of voters invested in reducing gun violence. Finally, the restoration of voting rights for all formerly incarcerated citizens would move the country one step closer to abolishing second-class citizenship.
Review state policy on voting restoration and who is eligible for restoration, which includes understanding how to interpret eligibility in “Get Out the Vote” efforts often held during an election year.

Advocate for statewide policy change. Only two states have no restrictions on voting rights (Maine and Vermont). In all other states gun violence prevention advocates could push state legislators to adopt more progressive restoration policies. For example, policy reformation could include automatic restoration of voting rights post-release, similar to a policy adopted by Rhode Island in 2006.59

RECOMMENDED CHANGES TO INFRASTRUCTURE

- Accessibility to information on voting restoration policies on city government websites and at the time of release.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STATE OFFICIALS FOR SUPPORTING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION:

- Change state policy to lessen restrictions on eligibility for voter restoration; including removing fees and fines as a barrier to reinstating one’s right to vote.
- Require education campaigns on voting restoration to be provided at the time of release for local and state penal institutions.
GOING FURTHER

Restoration of Voter Rights

Our country holds up the 15th Amendment as an indication of our commitment to moving towards an increasingly equitable society, one built on the belief that every American citizen is allowed equal access to our democracy regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." However, we fail to mention the swift backlash to our symbolic victory over long-standing oppression. In the years following the inclusion of the 15th Amendment, states across the country moved to create laws that criminalized blackness and ensured those crimes would render a person convicted of them ineligible to vote. This was not an unintended consequence, or a result of bad policymaking; it was the point.

A recent radio interview of Calvin Cordozar Broadus Jr., more commonly known as Snoop Dogg, highlights the impact of misinformation on individuals with a criminal justice history. The West Coast artist spoke candidly about his desire to vote for a leader who represents his values and admitted that the 2020 election would be his first time at the ballot box, offering this explanation: "For many years they had me brainwashed thinking that you couldn't vote cause you had a criminal record ... My record's been expunged, so now I can vote." Snoop Dogg, a California resident with no prior felony convictions, forfeited his right to vote for years because of how past criminal activity is tied to revocation of voting rights. It is time to invest in efforts to clarify eligibility to the electorate and educate them about the restoration of voting rights.

In recent years, some states have taken steps to change the harmful policies crafted to disenfranchise voters, primarily those who are Black. In May, prior to Florida lifting its requirement that all fines and fees be paid before a person could cast a vote, formerly incarcerated individuals with a felony record were facing coronavirus pandemic-related challenges accessing the court system to amend their sentence and restore their voting rights. The decision to lift this requirement has been celebrated. However, this was an unnecessary burden placed on the formerly incarcerated to hobble a 2018 amendment that Florida voters passed to restore voting rights to formerly incarcerated individuals. Restoring the right to vote is a racial justice issue and a moral imperative.
CONCLUSION

This year, Americans will be casting ballots in a highly anticipated and divisive election where legislators, campaigns, and grassroots organizations are hoping to harness the collective power of their constituencies. At the same time, the pageantry of politics we're accustomed to during an election year — debates, campaigning, and “Get Out The Vote” efforts — is changing before our very eyes. The tragic and dramatic upheaval of social and cultural institutions experienced by people from coast to coast as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and growing public attention to police violence Black and Latinx people cannot be overstated. By embracing the diversity and wisdom of activists across several generations, the gun violence prevention movement in recent years has taken important — and needed — steps to recognize the disproportionate impact of the gun violence crisis on Black and Latinx communities.

Together, medical professionals caring for the most critical coronavirus patients and protestors marching for a better, safer country for all citizens have made clear that our apathy will lead to our downfall. We must heed their calls, but we are under no illusions that this will be a simple task. Nor will this be fast. Black Americans, Latinx citizens, those with disabilities, and the youth demographic have been systematically pushed to the margins of the democratic process, if not purposefully excluded altogether. Decades of disenfranchisement will not be overcome in a matter of months, and breaking down systemic barriers to voting access at a time when a groundswell of voices are once again rising up against the institutional racism within so many of our systems reminds us that the moral arc toward progress in our nation is too frequently measured in inches, not feet.

To bring about effective policy change in gun violence, police violence, and voting rights, we must have representatives at the local, state, and federal level that are elected by, and responsive to, the will of the people. For so many citizens who have been denied access to fair and safe elections due to economic barriers, burdensome new laws, a prior conviction, voter purges, inaccessible polling locations, or a host of other reasons, the notion that we can simply vote our way into radical change feels implausible and out of touch. Many are disillusioned after years of looking in from the outside, and even more are feeling hopeless after participating in the process but feeling like nothing has changed. These stories are common, and dismissing them fails to recognize the heart of the problem. This is why each and every election is so critical, and why this year there is so much work to be done.

From massive overhauls of absentee voter systems, to institutional changes of how we think about who can vote and how they exercise that right, to highly specific adjustments in polling place behavior to ensure that everyone can cast a ballot safely during a global pandemic, we hope that this toolkit provides activists and advocates across the country with the resources they need to get to work at all levels of governance and ensure a more equitable and accessible democratic process for every American citizen. We further hope that you feel as inspired as we did by the words of Stacey Abrams, former gubernatorial candidate in the state of Georgia, who said in a recent op-ed that “voting is a first step in a long and complex process, tedious but vital. ... Voting is an act of faith. It is profound. In a democracy, it is the ultimate power.”

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WORKS CITED


7. Examing CDC data for the last 5 years it is available (2013-2018), 20,439 non-Hispanic white individuals were killed in the United States by homicide or legal intervention with a firearm, for a rate of 1.69. This is compared to approximately 12,855 Hispanic individuals who were killed in the same way and over the same time period, where the rate is 3.76.


19. Depending on your state, your Governor, State Election Commission, Secretary of State, Attorney General, or City Council may be appropriate targets for this action.


21. "In Expanding Vote by Mail, States Must Maintain In-Person Options During the Coronavirus Pandemic.”


26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
32. “Why Early Voting is About So Much More Than Convenience.”
39. Sam Levine, “Georgia City Under Fire For Moving Polling Location To Police Station,” The Huffington Post, October 9, 2019, available at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/jonesboro-georgia-polling-location_n_5d9e0979e4b0dddfc5127f07guccunter1.
43. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
51. Ibid.

60. "Stripping Voting Rights From Felons is About Politics, Not Punishment."


